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ABSTRACT

Based on the belief that learning to communicate is critical for success throughout life, this booklet discusses ways parents can work with their children to provide the experiences and encouragement that will develop this important skill. The booklet's four main sections are: (1) Infants; (2) The Preschool Years; (3) The Elementary School Years; and (4) Adolescence. Topics discussed are, by section: (1) The Importance of Early "Conversations" and A Love of Reading Starts Now; (2) Each Child Is Different, Don't Criticize--Teach by Example, Teach through Experience, What If Your Child Won't Talk?, The Hurried Child, Continue To Read, and Demonstrate Writing; (3) Fine Motor Skills First, Nurturing a Love of Reading, Developing Listening Skills, Encouraging Writing, Learning Disabilities, Going beyond Academics, The Truth about Lying, What Is Active Listening?, and Make Communicating a Habit; and (4) Make Time for Sharing, Communicating about Values, Communicating about Reading, The Age of Communication, Five Ways to Turn Off Communication, Effective Communication Checklist, and Preparing for Communication on the Job. A brief conclusion emphasizes that learning to communicate is a process that never stops and that parents who continue to pursue it build a relationship of trust, respect, and honesty that will last a lifetime. (SR)

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Helping Your Child Communicate

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Children announce their arrival in the world with a howl. For the rest of their lives, they communicate with others to express their needs, wants, thoughts, fears, and dreams.

Learning to communicate is critical for success throughout life.

Children who can translate their thoughts and ideas into words are more likely to be successful in school. Friendships and relationships often depend on the ability to express feelings. Good communicators are also more likely to be successful on the job.

Of course, children don't learn to communicate all at once. Children must learn to crawl before they can walk, and they also must babble and gurgle before they learn to speak. In fact, learning to communicate is a lifelong task.

As a parent, you play an important role in helping your child learn to communicate. You can provide the experiences and encouragement that will enable your child to develop this important skill. This publication discusses some of the ways you can work with your child.

A baby cries. Her* parent picks her up and begins comforting her in a gentle voice. In that moment, both the parent and the child are learning to communicate with each other.

At least at first, babies can communicate only through crying. In an amazingly short period of time, most children will have developed specific cries to communicate specific messages. Just as adults learn to modify their tone of voice and adjust their volume, infants develop an entire vocabulary of cries. Within a few weeks, most parents can tell if a cry means, "I'm hungry," or, "My diaper needs changing," or simply, "I'm bored."

Babies develop their communication ability in other ways, as well. Recent research in infant learning has found:

- One-day-old babies can be calmed with tape recordings of their own cries, and within days are able to distinguish their own cries from those of peers and older babies.
- Twelve-day-old babies can imitate an adult sticking out a tongue.
- Ten-week-old babies recognize their mother's voice from all others.
- Nine-month-olds recognize themselves in the mirror.
- Thirteen-month-olds can tell the difference between boy and girl babies—even when clothes are swapped.

Jim Trelease, author of *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, notes that children seem to be "programmed" from birth with the abilities they need to communicate. But, he adds, "like flowers out of water, they will wilt and be lost if they are not cared for over the next two years. Study after study shows us that when curiosity is not fostered between 6 and 24 months, it will not be there at age 10."

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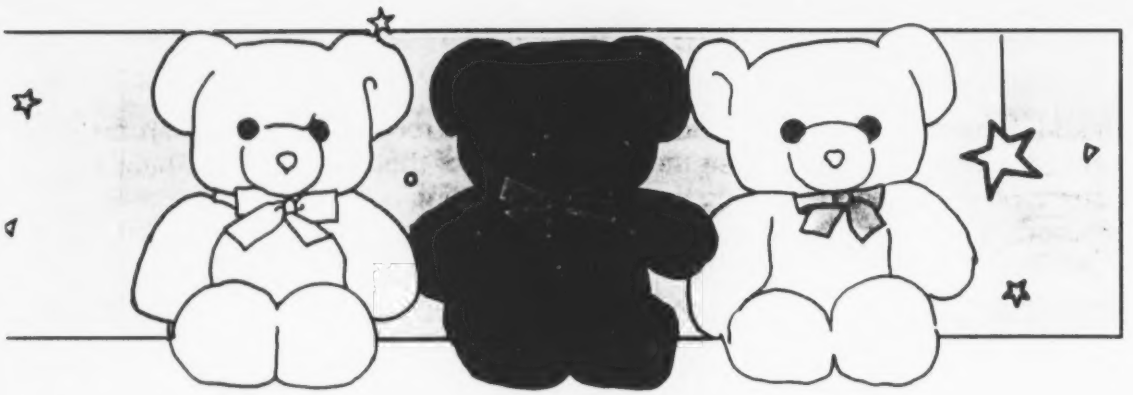
* Because this book is about a very important individual—your child—we have used the singular pronoun throughout. We have, however, tried to alternate "hers" and "his."



"From the day she was born, I had long talks with Sarah. People in the grocery store used to look at me like I was crazy. But I really believe that's when we established a pattern that continues to this day."

—Parent, Minneapolis, Minnesota

The Importance of Early 'Conversations'

What can parents do to foster their children's ability to communicate at an early age? The most important thing, experts agree, is to talk with children. In their book, *Better Speech for Your Child*, speech teachers (and mothers) Michelle Lattman and Antoinette Seandel note the importance of this early speech. "Though your baby may not understand your words," they write, "now's the time for him to begin hearing the melody and phonetics of language. Tell your baby the names of the objects in the room; talk about the book you've just read, or even some piece of ripe gossip. Baby will eat it all up."

Pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton recommends that parents also communicate with their children by imitating the child's speech. Children are delighted when parents repeat back a sound the child has first uttered. This kind of "conversation" teaches a child the basics of adult communication—that it is important both to speak and to respond to what the other person has said.

What about children who are raised in a *bilingual* environment? Studies show that these children may take longer to speak. But eventually, they will learn to speak in both languages.

A Love of Reading Starts Now

In addition to talking with your child, Jim Trelease recommends that parents begin *reading* to children from the earliest days of their lives. Establishing a pattern of reading, and teaching the child that reading is a happy, secure time, is what's important.

Pat the Bunny and other traditional favorites are a good place to start. And nursery rhymes are also popular. By *singing* nursery rhymes, parents can expand early learning opportunities even further, because music exercises a different part of the brain than does speech.

The Preschool Years

As children first learn to talk, the entire world seems to open up for them. Suddenly, they have a name for all the things in their environment.

Each Child Is Different

Language development is as individual as personality: Each child develops the ability to speak on his own timetable. Some children may be speaking quite clearly by 18 months, while others do not say much until their third birthday.

As children begin to talk, they often develop their own pronunciation for words—saying "bwoo" for "blue," or "goggie" for "doggie." Many parents are tempted to adopt those cute mispronunciations. But that only means it will take the child longer to learn the correct way to say the word. Children learn language best through imitation; and if children hear the words pronounced correctly, they will soon mimic their parents' speech.

Don't Criticize; Teach by Example

At the same time, it's important for parents not to correct their child's pronunciation directly. Children who are constantly criticized and corrected soon lose the desire to speak.

Small children frequently use just one word to communicate an entire thought. They'll say "bottle" when they mean, "I want my bottle"; or "up" when they mean, "I want to be picked up." Parents can help children enhance their use of language by using those single words in complete sentences—for

example, "Oh, would you like me to get you a bottle?" When parents use this kind of relaxed way of conversing, children learn that words can be used to express their thoughts and wants and ideas.

Also: Teach Through Experience

You can also help boost your child's language development by providing experiences that leave a lasting impression. A child who has had the opportunity to pet a sheep can learn not only the word "sheep," but also such words as "wool" and—of course—"baa."

When planning these activities, remember that almost any experience can provide opportunities for conversation. A walk outside can give an opportunity to learn words like "tree," "grass," and "sidewalk." Making cookies together can teach words like "flour," "sugar," and "hot." It's also important to keep in mind that small children have a short attention span. Several short sessions will produce better results than a day-long "language experience."

What If Your Child Won't Talk?

What should parents do if their child is not speaking at all? First, ask yourself several other questions:

- Is your child developing normally in other ways?
- Does your child seem to understand you when you speak to him?
- Does his hearing appear to be normal?
- Does your child have a history of ear infections?
- Are there any other reasons (a move, a divorce, the death of a loved one) that might be causing the delay—or relapse?

If you have questions about your child's language ability, talk with your pediatrician. A physical or emotional problem could be the cause of the delayed speech. The sooner the problem is identified, the sooner treatment can begin. But remember that there is a wide range of "normal" speech development. Your child may be concentrating on mastering other skills—walking, climbing, or getting dressed. Many children seem to focus on one skill at a time—so language development may take a back seat for awhile, only to become more important in a few months.

The Hurried Child

Some parents wonder if they should help their child get a head start in school by stressing the development of reading skills. It is true that even very young children can be taught to master certain academic skills. These children may enter kindergarten reading at a second- or third-grade level. But there is no evidence that these children continue to remain two or three years ahead of their peers. In fact, child development expert David Elkind argues that these "hurried" children are at a *disadvantage* compared with other children. By second or third grade, most other children have caught up in their academic skills. But the experiences children missed while they were being drilled in reading and math—the opportunity to play, to imagine, to develop a fantasy life—may never be recovered.

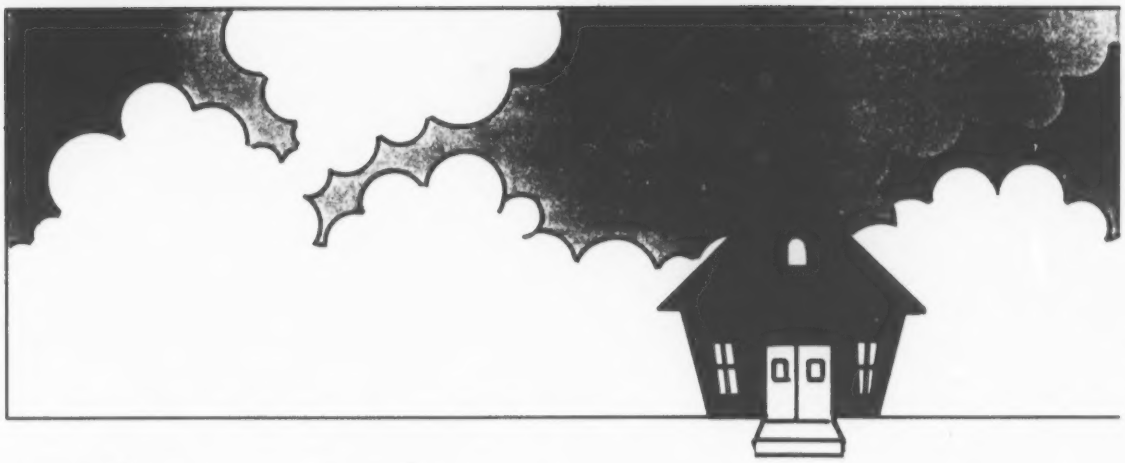
Parents who want to help their young children develop the skills they will need to become good readers can still plan home activities that are "developmentally appropriate." Helping a child match colors, shapes, and sizes can provide the foundation for recognizing letters, for instance. Taking children to the library regularly can build the habit of reading. And continuing to provide many experiences will offer a host of things to read and write about once she is ready. (Whether it's a trip to the zoo or a visit to a grandparent's house, you will be providing your child a host of memories that will enrich his life ... and his learning.)

Continue To Read

Reading to your child continues to be important throughout the preschool years. For very small children, heavy cardboard books help foster a love of reading. Nothing makes a child feel less capable than knowing he has destroyed something; child-proof books can build self-esteem while they build a love of reading.

Demonstrate Writing

Parents also can help their young children learn the importance of writing. Sometimes, have your child tell you a story. Write it down exactly as your child has spoken it. Then read it back to your child. Some stories can even be made into books, with a sentence or two on each page and child-supplied illustrations. You can also help your child write letters to relatives.

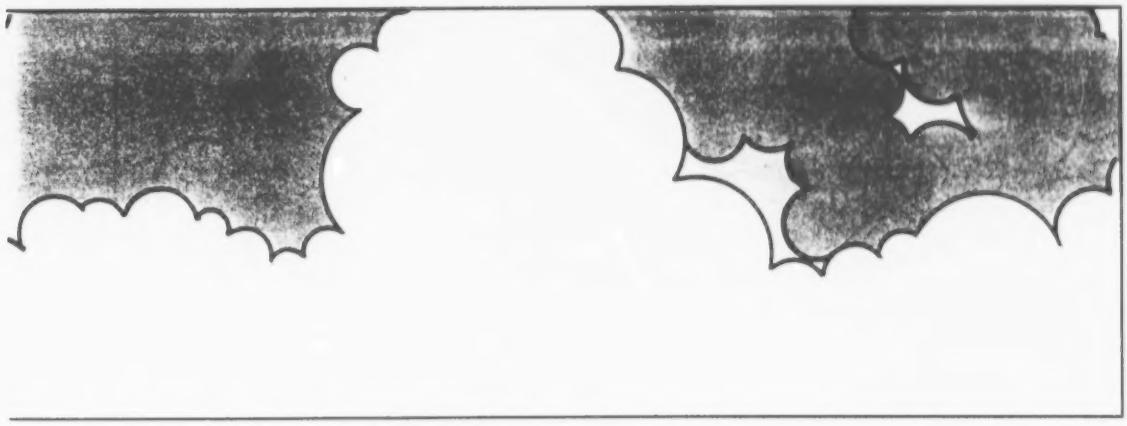


The Elementary School Years

A school principal with many years' experience once observed that every kindergarten child comes to school with the same goal: to learn to read. And parents, too, want to make sure their children master this most basic of all the basic skills. They know that a love of reading provides the foundation for all learning. Reading can open the door to communicating with people in other countries ... or even other times.

Fine Motor Skills First

There are some skills your child must master before he is ready to read. He must be able to pass something from one hand to another without putting it down, for example. Marguerite Kelly, author of *The Mother's Almanac II*, explains that children need this simple skill "to track their eyes from left to right, instead of up and down, which is more natural. If their eyes don't track, they can't read across the page."



Nurturing a Love of Reading

Most children will learn to read in first grade. The problem is that, while they master the basic skills of reading, they don't necessarily develop a love of reading that will carry them through life. Dorothy Rich, founder of the Home-School Institute, says, "The object in teaching reading is not to turn out readers who read only when they 'have to,' but to turn out readers who enjoy reading and who continue to read even when the homework is over." And that, she says, "is where the home environment supportive of reading comes into play."

Parents who have already established a habit of reading aloud to their children will find that reading to elementary school children provides a special joy. Parents who have not started reading aloud to their children will find the elementary school years an ideal time to begin. As children learn to read, they don't always want to be read *to*. Instead, they want to be read *with*. Ask children to read the part of one of their favorite characters in the story. Or they may say, "Tonight, Mommy, I'm going to read *you* a story."

Parents who aren't sure how or what to read to children at this age will enjoy Jim Trelease's *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. It talks about all the "how-to's" of reading aloud. In addition, it includes hundreds of suggestions for books to read to children at any age.

Because actions really *do* speak louder than words, make sure your children see you reading. Some families schedule a regular reading hour—when the television is turned off, the phone goes unanswered, and everyone snuggles up with a book.

Developing Listening Skills

Reading aloud to children helps them develop another important communication skill: listening. Today, possibly because of the effects of television, most children have a very short attention span. But when they become interested in listening to a story that involves and excites them, children can develop the

ability to listen for longer and longer periods of time each day. This ability to concentrate will pay dividends in all other areas of their school work as well.

Encouraging Writing

Parents can also help children learn to communicate through writing. Because writing is a skill, children get better at it with practice. Here are some suggestions for helping your child become a better writer:

Encourage your child to write. Get in the habit of writing notes—to family members, to friends. As soon as your child can print his name, give him a piece of paper for writing his own notes.

Learning Disabilities

Children learn according to their own timetable. Some children have special conditions that make it difficult for them to reach their full potential in school. These children are said to have "learning disabilities"—a condition that interferes with the brain's ability to process the information it receives.

There are many types of learning disabilities. For example, some children with normal eyesight are unable to make any sense of the letters or numbers they see on a page. Other children may be unable to concentrate for longer than a minute or two.

The American Academy of Pediatrics compares a learning disability to "a distorted television picture caused by 'technical problems' at the station. There is nothing wrong with the TV camera at the station or the TV set in your home. Yet, the picture is not clear. Something in the internal workings of the TV station prevents it from presenting a good picture." In other words, "The problem occurs in the brain *after* the eyes and ears have done their job."

There is no cure for a learning disability, but there *are* ways to help learning disabled children cope. Many people with learning disabilities have gone on to outstanding success. Olympic Gold Medal diver Greg Louganis, for example, suffered from dyslexia as a child. If you suspect your child may have a learning disability, let your child's teacher know your concern. Testing can determine whether your child is learning disabled. Then you and the school can work out a plan to help your child achieve his potential.

Show your child how writing is important in your own life. If you are writing a letter, a paper for school, or a job application, let your child see what you're doing.

Use writing to preserve memories. If you take a family outing, write down what happened. Encourage your child to keep a diary. And continue making homemade books.

Make writing easy. Keep pencils and paper handy. Buy your child some special paper for writing letters or thoughts.

Don't worry about spelling. Beginning writers know and want to use many more words than they can spell. They may write "GRL" for "girl" or "THAQ" for "thank you." Studies show that children who use this so-called "invented spelling" write more, and actually learn more about phonics in the long run than children who write only words they know they can spell.

Going Beyond Academics

Of course, the elementary school years are not only a time when children develop their ability to communicate in academic ways. During these years, children also grow and develop their ability to communicate about their feelings and their thoughts. Here, too, parents have a critical role to play.

Listen to behavior. "A child's behavior is his way of communicating," says T. Berry Brazelton. So parents need to learn how to "listen" to their child's behavior.

Children often communicate nonverbally—without words. They often act out their feelings when they feel pressured or in conflict. So when your child suddenly starts acting in a new way, don't automatically dismiss the new behavior as "just a stage." It may instead be a way of reaching out to tell you something important. For example, a child who is suddenly presented with a younger brother or sister may begin talking baby talk. Parents need to recognize that such behavior is really a way of asking for extra attention.

Children also may act out their feelings because they don't have the words to describe their feelings. You can help by providing your child with the words to portray his feelings. You might say something like, "You must feel very angry when your brother does that. In our house, it's okay to talk about angry feelings, but it's not acceptable to hit people." In that way, you have given your child the language he needs to begin talking about feelings, but you also have outlined acceptable behavior.

You may notice that as children reach the upper elementary grades, communication with members of the opposite sex frequently takes a nonverbal turn. Your daughter may report that she punched Billy in the lunch line. That's her way of communicating feelings she doesn't really understand and can't express. This may be a time to help her explore the words to go with how she's feeling.

Children often communicate nonverbally without words.

The Truth about Lying

Research has confirmed what parents already knew—kids sometimes tell lies. But although lying may be normal, parents still need to deal with it carefully. Let your children know that people who get a reputation for dishonesty have a difficult time communicating with friends and co-workers.

Sometimes parents themselves can actually encourage lying. There's no need to ask, "Who spilled the milk?" if your child was the only one in the room. Instead, ask, "How did the milk get spilled?" Talk about the need to clean up.

Other lies are more difficult for a parent to tolerate. If you believe your child is not telling the truth, you may want to say so directly. You might say, "It's hard to believe a story like that, even though I'd like to believe that you're telling the truth." Then wait silently, giving your child a chance to tell you the truth.

Of course, one of the main reasons children tell lies is to avoid parental discipline. When children have been honest about something they've done, you may want to consider reducing your normal punishment a little. In that way, children can learn that honesty really is the best policy.

What Is Active Listening?

Active listening is a technique that involves *reflecting* back what the listener has heard. In this example, a teenager is talking with her mother about her best friend and her boyfriend.

Teen: I feel like I'm going to die. At the dance, Jason spent the whole time talking with Jennifer.

Mother: That must have made you pretty upset.

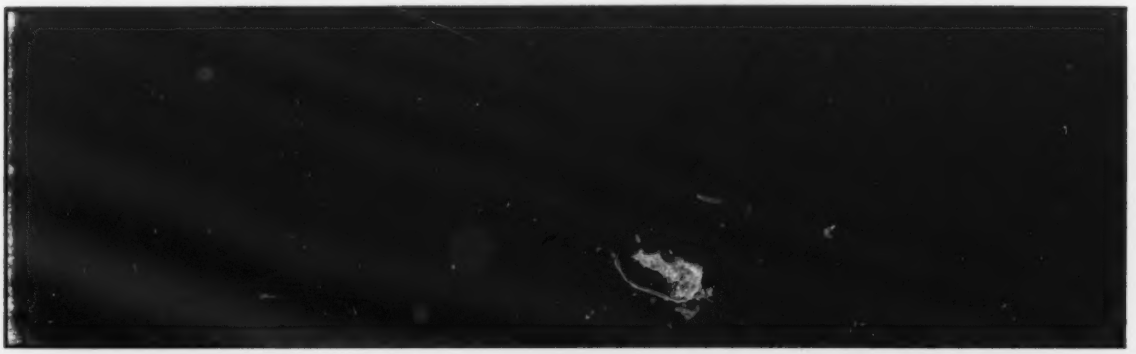
Teen: I'll say I'm upset. She's supposed to be my best friend. What kind of a friend is she, anyway?

Mother: You feel like she has betrayed your friendship.

Teen: I sure do. And I felt embarrassed just sitting there while Jason didn't pay attention to me.

Mother: It must have been embarrassing.

Notice that the mother is not offering her own comments. She is simply reflecting what her daughter is saying. The mother is not trying to solve the problem. Instead, she is allowing the daughter to communicate her feelings.



Make Communicating a Habit

Now is the time for parents and children to establish the habit of communication. The regular time you spend communicating with your child lays a foundation for the future. "You'll find that it's much easier to communicate with your growing children if you start doing it when they're young," says Edward R. Christophersen, professor of pediatrics at the University of Kansas Medical Center. The teenage years will be much easier if you have forged a bond based on communication during the elementary school years.

Here are some tips on how to *listen* to your child:

Communicate regularly. Set aside some time every day to talk with your child—even five or ten minutes. And make sure that each child has some special, private time with each parent every week.

Pay attention. When you are talking with your child, remember the motto, "Be here now." Don't worry about the dirty dishes in the sink or the phone calls that must be returned. Give your child the same undivided attention you would give to your boss or your best friend.

Resist the urge to give advice. Many children say they don't talk with their parents because their parents just talk and don't listen. Even when advice is well-intentioned, it can make a child feel dumb, inferior, or overly controlled. Try as hard as you can to keep your *child* talking. You might ask a question: "What happened then?" Or you might try active listening, reflecting back to your child what he is saying (see sidebar). Dr. Thomas Gordon's book, *Parent Effectiveness Training*, offers many specific suggestions on ways parents can use active listening.

Let your child know you enjoy and appreciate your conversations. A quick hug or a brief statement like, "I always enjoy talking with you," will let your child know that you have really *heard* what she has to say.

Adolescence

"The true test of a successful parent," says one mother who has raised several children, "is that you work yourself out of a job." Adolescence is the time when parents must begin the process of letting go. But it is also a time when communication between parents and teenagers is critically important, as teens make decisions that will affect them throughout their lives.

Parents who have established the habit of regular communication with their children will find it easier to weather the often stormy years of adolescence. But even parents who have not made regular efforts to communicate with their children can find ways to communicate with their teenagers.

"I used to wonder why Diana didn't want to talk with me when she got home from school. I'd think, 'Maybe she wore herself out talking all day.' But now I realize we hadn't developed the habit of communicating."

—Parent, Oakton, Virginia

Make Time for Sharing

Now is the time when parents need to seek out new opportunities for communication. A study by University of Illinois Professor of Human Development Reed Larson found that between the ages of 10 and 15, the amount of time young people spend with their families decreases by half.

Sharing activities can help parents and teens find new reasons to connect with each other. It also can help family members learn to see each other in new ways. A love of music or of athletics, for example, can serve as the focus for time spent together. Communication that takes place in the context of a shared interest is often less tense ... and more open.

Some parents and teens work together toward a common goal — from repainting a room to planting a garden. Still others agree to learn a *new* skill together: computer programming, dancing, a foreign language, or a new sport. These opportunities give both parents and teens a chance to see each other in new ways. And they can help build adolescents' self-esteem as they discover that they are a *better* tennis player (or singer) than Mom or Dad.

Communicating about Values

Today's adolescents have access to "a bewildering array of options, many with devastating outcomes," says Beatrix Hamburg, director of child and adolescent psychiatry at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. From sexual activity (on the rise, with 52 percent of girls and 66 percent of boys sexually active by age 17) to drugs (with drugs like crack and ice readily available in many communities), teens today must make decisions their parents never faced.

Most experts agree that teens *want* adult guidance and involvement in helping them make value decisions. "Kids get their values from their parents," says Virginia Williams, supervisor of guidance and counseling at Mt. Vernon High School, Alexandria, Virginia. Research bears out her observation. A 1989 study by Frances Ianni of Columbia University found "far more congruence than conflict" between the views of parents and their teenage children.

Keeping the lines of communication open is vital. Parents may be surprised to find that teens want open communication as much as their parents do. Research conducted by the William T. Grant Foundation found that the activity young people most enjoy sharing with their parents is "just talking."

How can parents help their teenagers learn to make responsible decisions about values? Here are some suggestions:

Talk about your values. Parents have a responsibility to talk with teens about difficult subjects—including drugs, alcohol, and sexual responsibility. Otherwise, teens will receive all their information about these subjects from their friends—or from television. Neither is likely to be a source of accurate information.

Practice what you preach. "When parents say, 'Don't drink and drive,' but then have a few cocktails before leaving for a party, they've shown their kids what they *really* think," says Williams.

Help your child develop specific techniques to translate values into behavior. Role play so your teen knows how to respond when friends say, "Everybody else is doing drugs. Why don't you?"

Set reasonable limits. What is "reasonable?" That depends on the age of the teenager. A 13-year-old generally can handle much less independence than a 19-year-old. At times, you may be the most help to your teenager by setting firm limits and sticking to them: "We have a curfew of midnight in this family."

Encourage communication with other adults. Not all teens feel comfortable talking with parents about every subject. You might suggest that your teenager talk with another trusted adult occasionally.

Communicating about Reading

By adolescence, virtually all teens can read. But whether they *want* to read may be another subject. Here are some ways parents can encourage teenagers to read and to talk about their interests:

Set an example. Let your kids see you reading for pleasure.

Give teens an opportunity to choose their own books. When you and your teen are out together, browse in a bookstore or library. Go your separate ways and make your own selections.

Read some books written for teens. "Young adults" novels can give you valuable insights into the concerns and pressures your teenager feels. You may find that these books provide a neutral ground on which to talk about sensitive subjects.

Acknowledge your teen's mature interests. Look for ways to acknowledge the emerging adult in your teen by suggesting some adult reading you think she can handle.

Make reading aloud a natural part of family life. Share an article you clipped from the paper, a poem, a letter, or a random page from an encyclopedia—without turning it into a lesson.

The Age of Communication

This has been called the "Age of Communication"—a time when people have access to more information than ever before. For example, just 40 years ago,

most people followed the news through their daily newspaper. Today, in addition to the daily newspaper, people can choose to watch televised news (including 24-hour news channels), listen to an all-news radio station, or even subscribe to a computer database that puts the latest news at their fingertips.

But in an era when so much information is being communicated, people must learn how to be "information literate." That is, they need to know how to find the information they need and how to use it.

Here are some ideas for how you as a parent can help your son or daughter develop skills for the information age:

Watch the news together. Choose a story that interests one of you. Read about the same event in the newspaper. Talk about how the story was the same. How was it different? Learning to sort through and evaluate information is an important adult skill.

Talk about how you learn things on your job. Have you attended special classes or training sessions? Do you read articles or books to sharpen your skills? Are you sometimes asked to teach a new employee? Let your son or daughter see that learning is a lifelong process.

Become an expert. Choose a subject that interests you. Then learn as much as you can. Encourage your son or daughter to do the same.

Mastering new ways to learn may be an area where your teen can teach *you* some skills. In many families, teens already show parents how to program the VCR and reset the digital clocks.

5 Ways to Turn Off Communication

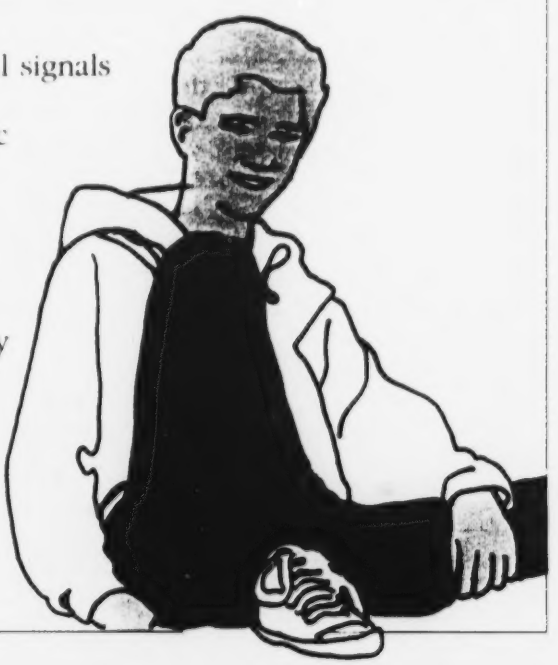
Here are five techniques that are guaranteed to turn *off* communication with your child:

1. Always be "too busy" to listen. Let your child know that it's a burden to find time to have a conversation.
2. When you do talk with your child, do something else at the same time—like watching TV, paying bills, or talking on the phone.
3. Argue with your child. After all, you know what's best.
4. Give lots of "you" messages. Say, "You always leave your room a mess," or "You never study." "I" messages that describe how you feel and think about a situation are better. For instance, "I really worry about your health when you don't eat right."
5. Don't talk to your child unless you have something to criticize. When you're proud of your child, keep it to yourself.

Effective Communications Checklist

What you need:

- ✓ Trust
- ✓ Honesty
- ✓ Openness
- ✓ Enough information
- ✓ Active listening
- ✓ Ability to see things from a child's point-of-view
- ✓ Eye contact
- ✓ Tuning in to nonverbal cues
- ✓ Sending appropriate nonverbal signals
- ✓ Being interested
- ✓ Being sensitive and empathetic
- ✓ A sense of humor
- ✓ Speaking clearly
- ✓ Being consistent
- ✓ Being fair
- ✓ Enthusiasm
- ✓ The ability to say you are sorry
- ✓ Taking enough time



Preparing for Communication on the Job

Changes in the workplace have led to new demands for communications skills. Today, many companies expect *all* employees to take an active part in making decisions.

That means communications skills will be even more important for success in the future. Family meetings are one way to help your son or daughter acquire these skills. Presenting a problem, asking for discussion, and working together to develop a solution are all skills that translate directly to the workplace.

You may also want to encourage your teen to take a speech course. Learning to be comfortable in front of a group can provide a real boost to self-esteem ... as well as give a potential job-seeker an advantage when seeking work.

Conclusion

Long after children learn to talk, they are still learning to communicate. In fact, the process never stops. As you help your child develop the skills he needs to communicate successfully throughout life, you probably will find that you have learned a great deal about yourself as well. You also will have built a relationship with your child based on trust, respect, and honest communication—a relationship that will last a lifetime.

Helping Your Child Communicate

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The need for this publication for parents was identified in a survey of AASA members and other school leaders, who strongly believe that parent communication and involvement with their children are critical to success in school and in life.

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